

ON THE NATURE OF MORAL VALUES

Imagine a dog idling in the foreground, a tree in the middle distance, and a turnip lying on the ground behind the tree. Either of two hypotheses, or a combination of them, may be advanced to explain the dog's inaction with respect to the turnip: perhaps he is not aware that it is there, and perhaps he does not want a turnip. Such is the bipartite nature of motivation: belief and valuation intertwined. It is the deep old duality of thought and feeling, of the head and the heart, the cortex and the thalamus, the words and the music.

The duality can be traced back to the simplest conditioning of responses. A response was rewarded when it followed stimulus *a*, and penalized when it followed *b*; and thereafter it tended to be elicited by just those stimulations that were more similar to *a* than to *b* according to the subject's inarticulate standards of similarity. Observe then the duality of belief and valuation: the similarity standards are the epistemic component of habit formation, in its primordial form, and the reward-penalty axis is the valuative component.

The term 'belief' of course ill fits this primitive level. Even the term 'similarity standard' requires a word of caution: such implicit standards of similarity are ascribed to the subject only on the behavioral basis of the experiments themselves, experiments in the reinforcement and extinction of his responses. The experiments afford at the same time a criterion for comparing the subject's implicit values, along the reward-penalty axis. His values are easier to plot, however, than his similarities. They are largely recognizable from innate reflexes, such as wincing, even without the recourse to experiments in reinforcement and extinction. Moreover, they stand in the simple dyadic relation of better and worse, whereas similarity is at least triadic: *a* is more similar to *b* than to *c*. The evaluations thus line up in a single dimension, while the similarities may be expected to require more dimensions.

Clearly all learning, all acquisition of dispositions to discriminatory behavior, requires in the subject this bipartite equipment: it requires a similarity space and it requires some ordering of episodes along the valuation axis, however crude. Some such equipment, then, must precede all learning; that is, it must be innate. There need be no question here of awareness, nor of ideas, innate or otherwise. It is a matter rather of physiological details of our complex and incontestably innate nervous system, which determine our

susceptibilities to the reinforcement and extinction of responses. Those details are perhaps not yet fully understood, but we need know little to be assured that what is required for all learning must not have been learned.

Our innate similarity space is our modest head start on the epistemic side, for it is the starting point for induction. Induction consists, primitively, in the expectation that similar episodes will have similar sequels; and the similarity concerned is similarity by our subjective lights. In our innate likes and dislikes we have our modest head start on the valuative side, and then induction is our guide to worthwhile acts. I find it instructive to dignify the lowly neural phenomenon of reinforcement and extinction in these subjectivist terms, for it represents that neural phenomenon as technology in the small: the use of inductive science for realizing values.

Our similarity space is progressively changed and elaborated as our learning proceeds. Similarity standards that led to bad predictions get readjusted by trial and error. Our inductions become increasingly explicit and deliberate, and in the fullness of time we even rise above induction, to the hypothetico-deductive method.

Likewise our ordering of sensory episodes along the valuation axis is progressively changed and elaborated. In some cases an epistemic factor contributes to the change. We learn by induction that one sort of event tends to lead to another that we prize, and then by a process of transfer we may come to prize the former not only as a means but for itself. We come to relish the sport of fishing as much as we relish the fresh trout to which it was a means. Values get shifted also in other ways — perhaps something to do with chemistry, in the case of the acquired taste for strong peppers or anchovies. Or in more baffling ways, if one moves on to Schönberg or Jackson Pollock.

The transmutation of means into ends, just now illustrated by fishing, is what underlies moral training. Many sorts of good behavior have a low initial rating on the valuation scale, and are indulged in at first only for their inductive links to higher ends: to pleasant consequences or the avoidance of unpleasant ones at the preceptor's hands. Good behavior, insofar, is technology. But by association of means with ends we come gradually to accord this behavior a higher intrinsic rating. We find satisfaction in engaging in it and we come to encourage it in others. Our moral training has succeeded. There are exceptions to this pattern of development, I regret to say, but happily not among my readers.

The penalties and rewards by which the good behavior was inculcated may have included slaps and sugar plums. However, mere show of approval and

disapproval on the parent's part will go a long way. It seems that such bland manifestations can directly induce pleasure and discomfort already in the very young. Perhaps some original source of sensual satisfaction, such as a caress, comes to be associated very early with the other more subtle signs of parental approval, which then come to be prized in themselves.

The distinction between moral values and others is not an easy one. There are easy extremes: the value that one places on his neighbor's welfare is moral, and the value of peanut brittle is not. The value of decency in speech and dress is moral or ethical in the etymological sense, resting as it does on social custom; and similarly for observance of the Jewish dietary laws. On the other hand the eschewing of unrefrigerated oysters in the summer, though it is likewise a renunciation of immediate fleshly pleasure, is a case rather of prudence than morality. But presumably the Jewish taboos themselves began prudentially. Again a Christian fundamentalist who observes the proprieties and helps his neighbor only from fear of hell-fire is manifesting prudence rather than moral values.¹ Similarly for the man with felony in his heart who behaves himself for fear of the law. Similarly for the child who behaves himself in the course of moral training; his behavior counts as moral only after these means get transmuted into ends. On the other hand the value that the child attaches to the parent's approval is a moral value. It had been a mere harbinger of a sensually gratifying caress, if my recent suggestion is right, but has been transmuted into an end in itself.

It is hard to pick out a single distinguishing feature of moral values, beyond the vague matter of being somehow irreducibly social. We do better to recognize two largely overlapping classes of moral values. *Altruistic* values are values that one attaches to satisfactions of other persons, or to means to such satisfactions, without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself. *Ceremonial* values, as we might say, are values that one attaches to practices of one's society or social group, again without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself. Definitions appealing explicitly to behavioral dispositions rather than thus to hidden motivations would be desirable, but meanwhile a vague sketch such as this can be of some help if we do not overestimate it.

It is clear from the foregoing examples of prudential taboos, hell-fire, repressed felony, and child training, that two members of a society may value an act equally and yet the value may be moral for the one and prudential for the other. But we like to speak also of the moral values or moral code or morality of a society as a whole. In so doing we may perhaps be taken to mean those values that are implemented by social sanctions, plus any further values that are moral values for most of the members individually.

I follow Schlick in placing the moral values in among the sensual and aesthetic values on an equal footing.² Some non-moral values, for instance that of fishing, are subject to transmutation of means into ends, and some are innate, and some accrue in other ways. But so it is in particular with moral values: some accrue by transmutation of means into ends, through training, and some perhaps require no training.

Schlick, like Hume, set great store by sympathy: by the pleasure and sorrow that are induced by witnessing others' pleasure and sorrow. We have these susceptibilities, he believed, without training. If they are somehow gene-linked, it would be interesting to understand the mechanism. This would then account also for the previous point, the infant's early responsiveness to signs of parental approval and disapproval, as a special case.

Tinbergen in his study of herring gulls determined what simple configurations on paper served to rouse the chick to an expectant attitude, as if toward its mother, and what simple configurations would arouse a complementary attitude in the hen.³ He noted a human analogue in the simple formula for 'cuteness': fat cheek, big eye, negligible nose. Disney knew how to induce audible female cooing in the movie theatre with a few strokes of the pen. The herring gull's response is instinctive; must ours, in this case, be otherwise? Again the rabbit that squeals from between the wolf's jaws is making an instinctive response that is altruistic in a functional sense; for the squeal does not deter the wolf, but it warns other rabbits. Hereditary altruism at its heroic extreme raises a genetic question, if the young martyr is not to live to transmit his altruistic genes; but biologists have proposed an answer. Altruism is mainly directed to close kin, and they transmit largely the same genes.

I represented our moral values as falling into two overlapping classes, the altruistic and the ceremonial. The classes overlap in two ways. Altruistic values are in part institutionalized and so may take on an added ceremonial appeal. Conversely, there is altruistic value in so behaving as not to offend against a neighbor's ceremonial values.

There is also a cross-classification, imposed by considerations of origin. Some values, in the altruistic category, perhaps issue freely from an innate faculty of sympathy, unless this class is empty and sympathy is an acquired taste. Some, in the ceremonial category, are embraced out of sentiments of solidarity; thus the dietary observances in some cases, and the old school tie. The basis here is perhaps sympathy still, in an attenuated way. Further, in any event, there are both altruistic and ceremonial values that are inculcated by precept, unsupported still by palpable reward or punishment. This is already a case of training in its mild way, a case of transmutation of means

into ends; the good behavior is indulged in at first as a means to the non-moral though ethereal end of parental or social approval, and only afterward comes to be valued as an end in itself. Finally, there is moral training by recourse to palpable reward or punishment over and above parental or social attitude. Few of us are of such saintly docility as to need no training of this earthier kind. But in due course, here again, means get transmuted into ends, and conscience is further fortified.

I remarked that this account places the moral values in among the sensual and aesthetic ones. By the same token it represents each of us as pursuing exclusively his own private satisfactions. Thanks to the moral values that have been trained into us, however, plus any innate moral beginnings that there may have been, there is no clash of interests as we pursue our separate ways. Our scales of values blend in social harmony.

I am using the first-person plural rather narrowly here, to include my readers and myself but not as many further persons as I could wish. There are those — I mention no names — whose moral training has been neglected or has not proved feasible. Their ordering of values has remained in such a state that these persons stand to maximize their satisfactions by battenning on our good behavior while cheating on their own. Society accommodates such misfits by introducing penalties to offset the imbalance in their values.

The moral values tend by virtue of their social character to be more uniform from person to person, within a culture, than many sensual and aesthetic values. Hence the tendency with regard to the latter to allow that *de gustibus non disputandum est*, while ascribing absoluteness and even divine origin to the moral law.

Hypotheses less extravagant than that of divine origin account well enough for such uniformity as obtains among moral values, even apart from possible innate components. It is merely that these values are passed down the generations, imposed by word of mouth, by birch rod and sugar plum, by acclaim and ostracism, fine, imprisonment. They are imposed by society because they matter to society, whereas aesthetic preferences may be left to go their way.

Language, like the moral law, was once thought to be God-given. The two have much in common. Both are institutions for the common good. They reflect, somewhat, the primitive duality of belief and valuation on which I remarked at the beginning. Language promotes the individual's inductions by giving him access to his neighbor's observations and even to his neighbor's finished inductions. It also helps him influence his neighbor's actions, but it does this mainly, still, by conveying factual information. On the other hand the moral law of a society, if successful, coordinates the actual scales of values of the

individuals in such a way as to resolve incompatibilities and thus promote their overall satisfaction.

In language there is a premium on uniformity of usage, to facilitate communication. In morality there is a premium on uniformity of moral values, so that we may count on one another's actions and rise in a body against a transgressor. In language as in morality the uniformity is achieved by instruction, each generation teaching the next. In the case of language there is less recourse to birch rod and sugar plum, because the rewards of conformity are built in. In morals, private deviations such as theft can augment one's satisfactions unless one's values have been rearranged by moral training or offset by external sanctions; but in language, private deviation directly defeats one's own immediate purpose by obscuring one's message. There is, however, an exception: lying is a deviation in verbal behavior that can work to one's private advantage. The utility of language for each of us hinges on a predominance of truthfulness on the part of others, but any of us can enjoy that advantage and lie a little too, to his private profit. Thus it is that the liar invites the reproaches not of the orthoëpist but of the moralist. Moral values need to be instilled into him that will offset the values served by lying. Failing that, we may incapacitate his future lies by spreading warnings.

For the usefulness of a language it is required that most speakers associate the same expression with the same sort of object, but it does not matter how the expression sounds as long as all members of the society make it sound about alike. An expression to the same purpose in another language can therefore differ utterly and it will not matter, if the two societies do not seek to communicate. Language thus tends to extreme uniformity within isolated societies and chaotic diversity between them. We see linguistic gradation in the world, but only because of gradations in the intimacy of communication.

Moral values may be expected to vary less radically than language from one society to another, even when the societies are isolated. True, there are societies whose bans and licenses boggle our sheltered imaginations. But we can expect a common core, since the most basic problems of societies are bound to run to type. Morality touches the common lot of mankind as the particularities of sound and syntax do not. Where language touches the common lot is rather in the intelligence and influence that the sounds and syntax serve to convey. Thus any variation of morality from culture to culture invites comparison perhaps with the variation of world view or scientific outlook from culture to culture, but certainly not with the extravagant variation of language.

When we set about comparing moralities from culture to culture, assessing variations and seeking the common core, we may begin by considering how to

separate the native's moral values from his other values. How much of what he does or refrains from doing is attributable to mistaken notions of causal efficacy on his part, and accountable therefore to misguided prudence rather than to moral scruples? He may believe in so full a complement of supernatural sanctions as to leave no scope for moral values as distinct from prudential ones. In this event we can do no better than recur to our derivative concept of the morality of a society, as distinct from that of an individual. The question then becomes that of determining what behavior is implemented by socially established rewards and penalties. This standard will fail us too, however, if the society is so successfully indoctrinated regarding supernatural sanctions that no social enforcement is called for. At this point the most we can do is compare the native's acts with ours in situations where ours qualify as moral acts by our own lights. We will observe whether he respects property, and, if he does not, whether he seems worried and furtive in taking it. We will observe whether he kills harmless creatures without meaning to eat them. We will try to observe whether he is promiscuous in his love life, and, if so, whether he is furtive about that. We can observe his behavior, when he lets us, and we can applaud or reprehend it in our way.

Moral contrasts are not, of course, so far to seek. Disagreements on moral matters can arise at home, and even within oneself. When they do, one regrets the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves. Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics.

Scientific theories on all sorts of useful and useless topics are sustained by empirical controls, partial and devious though they be. It is a bitter irony that so vital a matter as the difference between good and evil should have no comparable claim to objectivity. No wonder there have been efforts since earliest times to work a justification of moral values into the fabric of what might pass for factual science. For such, surely, were the myths of divine origins of moral law.

There is a legitimate mixture of ethics with science that somewhat mitigates the methodological predicament of ethics. Anyone who is involved in moral issues relies on causal connections. Ethical axioms can be minimized by reducing some values causally to others; that is, by showing that some of the

valued acts would already count as valuable anyway as means to ulterior ends. Utilitarianism is a notable example of such systematization.

Causal reduction can serve not only in thus condensing the assumptions but also in sorting out conflicts. Thus take the question of white lies. If we once agree to regard truthfulness as good only as a means to higher moral ends, rather than as an ultimate end in itself, then the question becomes a question essentially of science, or engineering. On the one hand, the utility of language requires a preponderance of truthfulness; on the other hand the truth can cause pain. So one may try to puzzle out a strategy.

Causal reduction is often effective in resolving moral conflicts not only within the individual but between individuals. One individual disputes another's position on some point of morals. The other individual tries to justify his position instrumentally, hence by causal reduction to some ulterior end which they both value. The first individual is then either persuaded or proceeds to contest the causal reduction, in which case the issue has been gratefully transformed into a cognitive question of science. This way of resolving moral issues is successful to the extent that we can reduce moral values causally to other moral values that command agreement. There must remain some ultimate ends, unreduced and so unjustified. Happily these, once identified, would tend to be widely accepted. For we may expect a tendency to uniformity in the hereditary component of morality, whatever it may be, and also, since the basic problems of societies are much alike, we may expect considerable agreement in the socially imposed component when it is reduced to fundamentals.

Even in the extreme case where disagreement extends irreducibly to ultimate moral ends, the proper counsel is not one of pluralistic tolerance. One's disapproval of gratuitous torture, for example, easily withstands one's failure to make a causal reduction, and so be it. We can still call the good good and the bad bad, and hope with Stevenson that these epithets may work their emotive weal. In an extremity we can fight, if the threat to the ultimate value in question outweighs the disvalue of the fighting.

There remains the awkward matter of a conflict of ultimate values within the individual. It could have to do with the choice of a career, or mate, or vacation spot. The predicament in such a non-moral case will concern only the individual and a few associates. When the ultimate values concerned are moral ones, on the other hand, and more particularly altruistic ones, the case is different; for the individual in such a dilemma has all society on his conscience.

The basic difficulty is that the altruistic values that we acquire by social conditioning and perhaps by heredity are vague and open-ended. Primitively the premium is on kin, and primitively therefore the tribe in its isolation

affords a bold boundary between the beneficiaries of one's altruism and the alien world. Nowadays the boundary has given way to gradations. Moreover, we are prone to extrapolate; extrapolation was always intrinsic to induction, that primitive propensity that is at the root of all science. Extrapolation in science, however, is under the welcome restraint of stubborn fact: failures of prediction. Extrapolation in morals has only our unsettled moral values themselves to answer to, and it is these that the extrapolation was meant to settle.

Today we unhesitatingly extrapolate our altruism beyond our close community. Most of us extend it to all mankind. But to what degree? One cannot reasonably be called upon to love even one's neighbor *quite* as oneself. Is love to diminish inversely as the square of the distance? Is it to extend, in some degree, to the interests of individuals belonging to other species than own? As regards capricious killing, one hopes so; but what of vivisection, and of the eating of red meat?

One thinks also of unborn generations. Insofar as our moral standards were shaped by evolution for fostering the survival of the race, a concern for the unborn was assured. One then proceeds, however, as one will, to systematize and minimize one's ethical axioms by reducing some causally to others. This effort at system-building leads to the formulation and scrutiny of principles, and one is then taken aback by the seeming absurdity of respecting the interests of non-existent people: of unactualized possibilities. This counter-revolutionary bit of moral rationalization is welcome as it touches population control, since the blind drive to mass procreation is now so counter-productive. But the gratification is short-lived, for the same rationalization would seem to condone a despoiling of the environment for the exclusive convenience of people now living.

It need not. A formulation is ready to hand which sustains the moral values that favor limiting the population while still safeguarding the environment. Namely, it is a matter of respecting the future interests of people now unborn, but only of future actual people. We recognize no present unactualized possibilities.

Thus we do what we can with our ultimate values, but we have to deplore the irreparable lack of the empirical check points that are the solace of the scientist. Loose ends are untidy at best, and disturbingly so when the ultimate good is at stake.

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NOTES

¹ Bernard Williams, *Morality* (New York: Harper, 1972), pp. 75f, questions the disjointness of these alternatives. I am construing them disjointly.

² Moritz Schlick, *Fragen der Ethik*, (Vienna, 1930).

³ Nikolaas Tinbergen, *The Herring Gull's World*, (London: Collins, 1953).